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ABSTRACT

This student guide for a program focusing on how children develop self-confidence or self-doubt and learn whether or not they are competent provides some guidelines and special activities for increasing competence in children. Designed around a magazine format to allow maximum flexibility to different groups using the materials, the guide is divided into seven sections: (1) an overview of the theme and contents; (2) a summary of the major learnings of the theme; (3) feature articles containing the major content and including practical suggestions for parents; (4) a film review section which includes a synopsis of the accompanying film program and a related discussion question; (5) three activities aimed at both individual and group participation; (6) a selection of field activities, discussion questions, and research topics designed to reinforce the ideas presented in the articles and meet the needs of a wide variety of classroom groups; and (7) a bibliography for further reading on the theme. (Author/JEG)

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COMPETENCE:

IT'S ALL IN YOUR MIND

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Stacking the Deck

A world to be born under your footsteps...
St.-John Perse

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FROM THE EDITORS

Competence is needed for sheer survival. We wouldn't last long in this world if we didn't have certain basic coping skills.

Competence also opens the door to fulfillment. We lead happier and more satisfying lives when we are able to apply our talents and capabilities.

In this booklet you will learn how each of us develops self-confidence or self-doubt, and how we learn whether or not we are competent. Some guidelines and special activities for increasing competence in children are also included.

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THE BIG IDEAS

How competent children become is largely determined by how competent they believe they are.

Self-confidence — or self-doubt — is taught to children by parents and other adults.

When children's mistakes and weaknesses are constantly pointed out and corrected, they learn that they are not competent.

When children's strengths are emphasized and they are given chances to be successful, they learn they are capable.

Alice: Where I come from, people study what they are *not* [emphasis added] good at in order to be able to do what they *are* good at.

Mad Hatter: We only go around in circles in Wonderland; but we always end up where we started. Would you mind explaining yourself?

Alice: Well, grown-ups tell us to find out what we did wrong, and never do it again.

Mad Hatter: That's odd! It seems to me that in order to find out about something you have to study it. And when you study it, you should become better at it. Why should you want to become better at something and then never do it again? But please continue.

Alice: Nobody ever tells us to study the right things we do. We're only supposed to learn from the wrong things. But we are permitted to study the right things *other* people do. And sometimes we're even told to copy them.

Mad Hatter: That's cheating!

Alice: You're quite right, Mr. Hatter. I do live in a topsy-turvy world. It seems like I have to do something wrong first, in order to learn from that what not to do. And then, by not doing what I'm not supposed to do, perhaps I'll be right. But I'd rather be right the first time, wouldn't you?

— Lewis Carroll
Alice in Wonderland

Taken from THE ANNOTATED ALICE by Lewis Carroll, illustrated by John Tenniel. Introduction and notes by Martin Gardner. Copyright © 1960 by Martin Gardner. Used by permission of Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.

A TRUE STORY

A high school senior — let's call him Bob — took the college aptitude test (ACT) and received a score of 96. He thought this meant he had an IQ of 96.

That fall Bob entered college. In the first semester he received failing or barely passing grades in all of his courses. He started to think about dropping out of school, and went to talk to a counselor at the college. The counselor happened to mention that a score of 96 on the ACT meant that he had scored higher than 96% of all the other students who took the test. Bob's IQ was not 96 as he had believed, but somewhere between 130 and 140.

Bob decided to stay in school. In the second semester, he got A's in nearly all his courses.

IN HIS FIRST SEMESTER OF COLLEGE, BOB DID VERY POORLY IN SCHOOL. BUT IN THE SECOND SEMESTER, HE DID VERY WELL. WHAT DO YOU THINK MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

_____ Bob's IQ changed.

_____ Bob took easier courses in the second semester.

_____ Bob learned that he was capable of doing college level work.

5

The Confidence Game

Self-trust is the first secret of success.
— *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

"He's lost his confidence."

How often have you heard sportscasters or coaches say that about athletes who are in a slump? To do well, athletes need to believe in themselves. But that's not true just for athletes. It's also true for teachers and lawyers and business executives, butchers and bakers and candlestick makers. It's true for adults, adolescents, and children. And it's true for you.

Don't you behave differently in situations where you feel confident than in those where you don't?

What is **Confidence**? For Reggie Jackson it's knowing he can hit whatever the pitcher throws. For you it may be knowing that you can do the latest dance. For a 3-year-old it may be knowing that she can tie her shoelaces or put a puzzle together.

But no matter what the task, self-confidence is knowing you can do it.

A POWERFUL FORCE

Self-confidence — or the lack of it — plays an important part in determining how **Competent** — or capable — we become. The abilities we were born with, of course, also help to determine whether we succeed or fail. But ability is not enough. To become really competent, we have to believe in those abilities. In other words:

Those Who Think They Can Do,
Do.
Those Who Think They Can't,
Don't.

To a large extent, we become what we think we are.

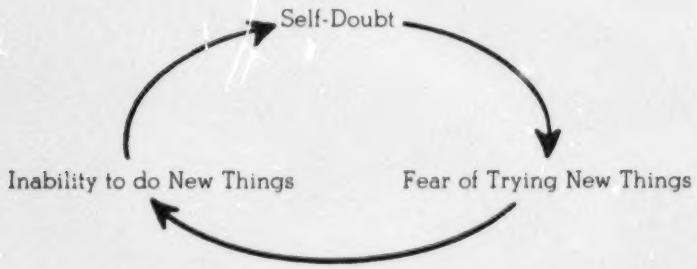
Competence, then, is learned. It is not something we are born with. We learn that we are competent — or not — as other people react to what we do. What we learn has a major effect on how we approach new things.

THE CHILD OF SELF-DOUBT

When a child with no self-confidence approaches a new task, he or she is likely to think:

> *I'm a loser. I just can't seem to do things as well as other people. There's no use trying. I'll just fail and be humiliated again. It's just too hard to learn new things.*

Children who have learned that they are not competent are afraid to try new things. By avoiding new things, however, they never get a chance to learn that they *can* do things.



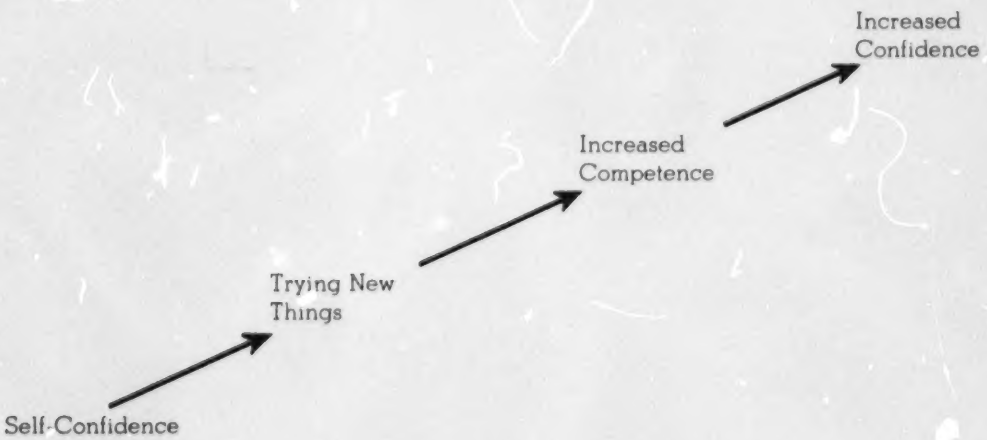
Life becomes a vicious circle.

THE CHILD OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

Here, on the other hand, is how a self-confident child might approach life:

> *I can do lots of things well. Of course, I still have a lot to learn, and there are some things I can't do yet. But I'm sure if I keep on trying I'll be able to do those things someday. Learning is fun.*

Children who have learned that they are competent eagerly reach out for new experiences. When they learn to do these things, their self-confidence grows even more. This leads them to try more difficult things:



Their path is onward and upward.

Self-confidence, then, leads to competence and success. Let's look at how parents can give their children this precious gift.

To Competence Through Confidence

It is. . . good. . . to sing praises.
Psaln: 92

Have you ever noticed how proud young children are of their accomplishments? How they will urge their parents to "watch this" or "look at what I made"?

Young children want to be seen as capable and strong. How parents and other adults react to what they do has a powerful effect on what they learn about themselves.

Children believe their parents. Here are some ways parents can help children believe that they are competent.

IN PRAISE OF PRAISE

To some parents, "common sense" says: "If I want my children to be competent, I must be sure to point out and correct all their mistakes." These parents may end up spending a lot of time telling children about their weaknesses. But constant criticism just teaches children they can't do things very well. Gradually, they lose confidence in themselves.

When, however, parents focus on their children's strengths, they help their children learn that they are capable. By letting children know how it feels to succeed, parents encourage children to keep trying.

What Would You Say?

Jimmy is trying to dress himself. He gets his shirt and jeans on fine, but puts his socks on inside out. Will he be more likely to get them right the next time if his mother says:

"Oh, Jimmy, you put your socks on wrong again. Why can't you remember that the fuzzy part goes on the inside?"

or

"Good! You got your shirt and jeans right. Why don't you just change your socks so the fuzzy part is inside."

EXPECT THE BEST

Did you know that some scientists believe they can make flatworms turn in a certain direction on a maze simply by *expecting* them to turn that way? If this is true for worms, just think what effect adult expectations must have on young children!

Children tend to live up to the expectations of parents and other adults. They usually act the way people expect them to act.

It follows, then, that if parents want children to become competent, they should expect this of their children. They should show children that they believe in them by giving them responsibility and letting them do things for themselves as much as possible.

A Prophecy Fulfilled

In a famous experiment conducted during the 1960's, a group of first grade children was given an IQ test. Their teachers were told that the purpose of the test was to find out which children would do especially well in school.

Before scoring the tests, the experimenters selected at random the names of several children in each class. They told the teachers that these children would be their best students. The experimenters had no basis for saying this.

Since the names of these children had just been drawn from a hat, they wanted to see how this "false" information would affect the success of these children in school.

At the end of the year all the children were tested again. Which children do you think improved the most? Right. It was those children whom the teachers had been told would do well.

This experiment is an example of a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy:

When we expect people to behave in certain ways, very often this prophecy — or prediction — comes true.

In the case of the first-graders in the experiment, their teachers expected some of them to do well and others not to. Somehow, the teachers communicated this prophecy to the students. The children whose names had been drawn at random learned from their teachers that they were competent, and they acted accordingly. The prophecy was fulfilled.

How do you think the teachers in this experiment showed the students what their expectations were?

PROVIDE EXPERIENCES FOR SUCCESS

"Nothing teaches like success," goes the old saying, and how true it is. When we succeed at something, our confidence increases. Our knowledge that we are competent leads to further success.

Young children, especially, need to experience success. The list of things they can do is much shorter than the list of things they can't do. They need their parents' help in learning that they *can* do things. Parents can take advantage of everyday opportunities to help children see what they can do. They can find tasks that children can do around the house. For example, a 3-year-old may not be able to completely set the table, but may be very good at putting a spoon at each place.

Parents can also help children when they are experiencing difficulty. If a child is struggling unsuccessfully to put on his tee shirt, the parent could help by slipping the shirt over his head and arms. Then the child could experience the success of completing the operation by pulling it down over his tummy.

Of course, no parent can, or would want to, keep children from every possibility of failing. Children also learn from failure. But parents who want their children to grow in self-confidence will be sure that they have many regular successful experiences. Competence requires challenge and practice. Activities such as those on the next page can help children discover their talents and interests and learn:

"I CAN DO IT."

CONFIDENT - IALLY YOURS

There are many areas in which children can learn that they are competent. Here are just a few:

Arts & Crafts
Even young children can master the basics of popular arts and crafts like: sewing; woodworking; weaving; sculpturing in clay, soap or papier-mache; potato printing; paper cutting and folding; jewelry making; painting; and making musical instruments. Save materials you usually throw out, and look at resource books like those below to see how children can put these materials to creative use.

Camping
You can camp right in your own backyard, or at a nearby park or beach. Children can be assigned simple tasks like: unpacking; collecting wood; helping put up the tent; and cooking. There'll be opportunities to practice and pick up lots of new skills: zipping and unzipping; making knots; fishing; reading a compass; and crabbing. The satisfaction of working together toward a common goal is one they won't forget soon.

Contributing To The Household
Children feel good about themselves when they have something to offer to the running of the household. From an early age, they can take on responsibility for simple tasks like: picking up the newspaper; putting away groceries; folding laundry; emptying baskets; raking leaves; and sweeping the floor. Older children feel especially proud when they can help with younger siblings: holding the baby's bottle; making simple toys for the baby; or telling a story to a younger brother or sister.

Gardening
To children there are few things more fun than digging in the dirt. Planting seeds and watching them grow is a source of wonder and joy to children. They don't need a lot of space. A window box or a few flowerpots will hold some beans, tomatoes, herbs, flowers and radishes.

Body Movement
Self-confidence grows with physical strength and coordination. Give children lots of space, materials and opportunities for free physical movement. In addition, there are many special experiences you may want to introduce them to: dancing; acting; playing an instrument; singing; and swimming, for example.

Collecting
Children love to collect things: rocks; coins; stamps; buttons; bottles; bugs; shells; and butterflies, for instance. With a little help from you, children can learn a lot about one area, and end up with a collection that they can be proud of. Collecting offers a great opportunity for hikes and field trips, too.

Cooking
Food is important to children, and knowing how to prepare it gives them a sense of pride and accomplishment. You may be surprised at how many things children can do in the kitchen. If you help them observe basic safety rules, they can: cut; grind; grate; beat; stir; mash; peel; wash; squeeze; strain; measure; and pour. They can help shop and plan menus, and follow simple recipes. In the process, they develop their small muscles, and learn a lot about: foods; words; numbers; time; safety; and following directions.

Observing Holidays
Children needn't be passive observers of holidays. They can become part of family traditions by helping to plan and prepare for celebrations. They can: help select the Thanksgiving turkey and Christmas tree; make Halloween costumes and Valentine's Day Cards; dye Easter eggs; and make Matzo for Passover. Many holidays — like Martin Luther King's birthday or St. Patrick's Day — are a good time to talk about history, folklore and the meaning behind holiday observations.

FILM REVIEW SECTION

Stacking the Deck

Sandy Marshall has been playing cards at home with her son, Marc, to help him with his numbers. When Grandpa notices that Marc has trouble keeping his high and low numbers straight, he decides to take this "problem" into his own hands.

Grandpa starts giving Marc daily math lessons at which he focuses on Marc's mistakes. Marc soon loses his ability to concentrate both at home and at school. Finally, Sandy decides that Grandpa's program is doing more harm than good. She starts playing cards with Marc herself again, and Marc regains his former enthusiasm and confidence.

Grandpa cannot understand why no one appreciates his efforts until Sonny points out to Grandpa all the things he is doing wrong as he tries to fix the stereo. Suddenly Grandpa understands how Marc must have felt during their math lessons.

HOW DID MARC FEEL DURING THOSE LESSONS?

ACTIVITY PAGES

activity #1
WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

In each of the following situations, how would you respond to the child in a way that could increase his or her sense of competence and confidence?

Three-year-old Janie is trying out her new puzzle. It's taking her a long time to put it back together, but she seems happy and totally absorbed. She's been trying to find the right spot for one particular piece for about 5 minutes now. It is painful for you as a parent to watch this slow process.

Your 4-year-old son and his best friends are learning how to throw a baseball. Your son has been having trouble, but is gradually getting better. He keeps glancing at his friend, though, who is making much faster progress.

Your daughter is helping you prepare for her fifth birthday party. She asked if she could set the table by herself, and you let her. She's very proud of herself, even though she's put all the forks on the right side of the plates, and the glasses near the edge of the table.

You may choose to role play these situations with your classmates. If you do, have the student who plays the child comment on how the "parent's" response made him or her feel. Have the rest of the class offer suggestions as to how else the "parent" might have responded.

activity #2
REMEMBER HOW IT FEELS

With your classmates, think back on your own experience to times when you felt people saw only your weaknesses, or didn't expect very much of you, or did other things to lower your self-confidence. Choose 3 or 4 of these incidents, and role-play them.

activity #3
COMPETENCE BINGO

Show how competent you are by finding the answers to each of the following questions in the box below. If you answer each question correctly, the answers will form a straight line.

1. The ability to do things is called _____.
2. _____ is knowing you can do something.
3. Competence is largely _____ by children from their parents.
4. One way children gain in competence is by having their _____ pointed out.
5. Young children need lots of chances to experience _____.
6. Children who feel confident are usually _____ to try new things.
7. Parents who give children lots of _____ help them feel good about their abilities.
8. Parents' _____ play a major role in how capable children become.

Strengths	Eager	Criticism	Learned
Incompetence	Weaknesses	Success	Inherited
Self-Doubt	Expectations	Failure	Afraid
Competence	Responsibility	Praise	Self-Confidence

GRAB BAG

to do

1. In a nursery school, day care center or Head Start center, observe children at play for at least one-half hour and look for differences among them in their self-confidence.
   Do some children take more initiative than others in trying out new and different things?
   Are some children more willing to do things on their own?
   Do some children seem able to do more things than others?
   How do the adults in the room encourage or discourage children's sense of competence and confidence?
2. Choose one or two children from the above group who seem more confident of themselves, and one or two who seem less confident. Take each of them aside privately and ask them to tell you what things they can do well, and what things they like about themselves. How do the children differ in their answers?
3. Invite a psychologist to talk to your class about the relationship between competence and self-esteem.

to discuss

1. Did you ever feel as a child that you couldn't do anything right? How did your parents or other adults make you feel better or worse about your abilities?
2. How does it affect your performance now when someone criticizes you? When someone praises you?
3. How can you help children learn if you don't point out their mistakes?
4. Do certain children, because of negative social expectations, need special help in feeling competent? What can their parents do to increase their sense of competence?
5. How does this quote relate to competence?

> "Whatever one believes to be true
> either is true
> or becomes true in one's mind."
>
> — John C. Lilly
> *The Center of the Cyclone*

to research

1. How self-concept affects performance.
2. Some programs designed to help adults become more competent and self-confident.
3. Experiments that have shown the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy.
4. The "Fear of Failure" described by John Holt in his books *How Children Fail*.

BOOK BROWSING

Here are some books that contain more information on...

...the relationship between competence and self-esteem

Peoplemaking. Virginia Satir. Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1972. (paperback)

Your Child's Self-Esteem. Dorothy Corkille Briggs. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1970. (paperback)

...how children learn self-confidence and self-doubt

How Children Fail. John Holt. New York: Delta, 1964. (paperback)

How Children Learn. John Holt. New York: Dell, 1969. (paperback)

...some activities that can increase self confidence and competence

I Saw a Purple Cow and 100 Other Recipes for Learning. Ann Cole, Carolyn Haas, Faith Bushnell, Betty Weinberger. Boston: Little, Brown, 1972. (paperback)

The Mother's Almanac. Marguerite Kelly and Elia Parsons. Garden City, New York. Doubleday & Co., 1975. (paperback)

A Pumpkin in a Pear Tree. Creative Ideas for Twelve Months of Holiday Fun. Ann Cole, Carolyn Haas, Elizabeth Heller, Betty Weinberger. Boston: Little, Brown, 1976. (paperback)

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